

# Ilau in Minangkabau Culture: A Study of Understanding and Interpreting Meaning Based on Gadamer's Hermeneutics

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## Abstract

*Ilau* is a culture of Minangkabau People – a tradition of lamenting – which is a way of expressing sadness or grief due to death of a son, a *penghulu* (village leader), or other family members. Furthermore, *Ilau* is also an expression of sadness for missing someone or something, for example, a son to be married, a loss of love from a husband who is to marry another woman (practicing polygamy), or a loss of cattle preyed by tiger. *Ilau* is passed on from one generation to another in a *nagari* (the lowest governmental level in Minangkabau), and has traditionally turned into several different forms. As an expression of collective sadness of a *nagari*'s people in Minangkabau, *Ilau* is performed in various occasions such as death, marriage, and catching tiger. The ritual is encoded in words, body movements, songs, and tools and becomes part of symbolic system to realize the essence of Minangkabau cultural cosmology. *Ilau* is interestingly a center of connection of related issues and influential to behaviors which can generate melodic lament and body movements. From these expressions and connection among various cultural expressions, a psychobiological relation is emerged. *Ilau* describes a sentimental feeling of a mother, a wife, or members of a community. *Ilau* is linked with some theme of interpretation related to sadness, fear, victory, wrath, male narcissism, status rivalry, passion and submission. *Ilau* can also be interpreted as a medium of *silaturahmi* (friendship), solidarity, education, religiosity, patience, prestige, and emotional conflict. As a humanistic tradition among *nagari*'s people, *Ilau* turns up to be a form communal sense of togetherness. People willingly join the ritual whenever *Ilau* is held. The time-consuming and heavy work is eased by the collectivity of the people.

**Keywords:** *Ilau* ritual, hermeneutics, interpretation of meaning

## 1. Introduction

This article is aimed at discussing the expressive way of lamenting by Minangkabau people, from a ritual activity to an art performance. A cry accompanied with verbal expressions becomes a ritual of cry and lament, which is related to emotions and communicated through specific symbol, acting as a sign vehicle to influence meaning.

In general, a lament in Minangkabau is termed as *Ilau*. *Ilau* means “reciting *pantun* until late at night, telling a story in a melody like someone who is bewailing.”<sup>1</sup> Usman asserts that *Ilau* is a type of mystical ritual led by a tiger tamer individually or collectively, saying spells in a restless rhyme.<sup>2</sup>

In Minangkabau, *Ilau* is a procedural cultural metaphor; words, body movements, songs, and any other tool which is part of symbolic system to realize the essence of Minangkabau cultural cosmology. The central meaning of *Ilau* in Minangkabau is the relationship between ways and unusual textual behaviors in the form of literary art symbols performed in words, body movements of a dancer, songs in melodic tone, as well as visual symbols in shapes of lines, space, and colors. *Ilau* as a lament exists in a center of an interesting connection of related issues and it influences the way people behave, which can derive desire to do some movements and music. The relationship between psychobiological and culture is generated from the expressions and connection among various expressive systems of Minangkabau culture.

Even though the ability to reproduce lament belongs to woman, the meaning in general sense is to be understood, or at least felt, by all members of the community. The lament can be understood by emotional tone of metaphorical language as a picture, which is based upon similarity or comparison to shift an expression of individual sadness to a collective one.

*Ilau* as a collective sadness among Minangkabau people may appear in several forms which are commonly performed in death and wedding rituals. *Ilau* is collectively part of the culture of communities in *nagari*<sup>3</sup> in Minangkabau, distributed and passed on from one generation to another, and traditionally takes

<sup>1</sup>. Gouzali Saydam, *Kamus Lengkap Bahasa Minang Bagian Pertama* (Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Minangkabau, Padang:2004) h.136.

<sup>2</sup>. Abdul Kadir Usaman, *Kamus Umum Minangkabau Indonesia* (Angrek Media, Padang :2002) p.223.

<sup>3</sup>. *Nagari* is the lowest governmental level in Minangkabau version, inhabited by for tribes, at the minimum, with such characteristics as *basosok bajurami* (borders), *barumah batanggo* (having residence), *babalai bamusajik* (owning market and mosque), *basuku banagari* (having wide range of tribes and area), *balorong bakampuang* (having *korong* and village), *bahuma dan babendang* (having agricultural area and bendang), *balabuah batapian* (having roads and public bathing place),

different versions in either oral forms, accompanied with body language, or supporting tools.

*Ilau* as a totally traditional work of a cultural community is expressed collectively. It is a kind of hope of the community in the *nagari*, which reflects cultural and social identity. The cultural standards and values conveying sadness are transmitted orally through laments, body movements, songs or music of free rhythmical melody, and supporting tools.

*Ilau* is performed not only for human beings but also for tiger. For Minangkabau people, besides a wild animal tiger carries a special meaning. In their myth, tiger is believed to be a materialization of their ancestors; it is a reincarnation of the ancestors who reappear. Minangkabau people call it *Inyia*. Traditionally, in addition to its ability to feel and sensitivity to what is right and wrong, tiger is believed to be an animal which should be respected and which can protect the village.

Any tiger having distracted people's peace by stealing cattle or killing a member of the community has to be caught, but it is not to harm it. People usually do the ritual specially to catch the tiger (*Ilau menangkap harimau*). Such a ritual is performed through spells by a shaman, which can also be assisted by the community members of either women or men.

## 2. Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Hans Georg Gadamerian hermeneutic theory consists of four approaches: historical, dialectical, linguistic, and meaning and truth. Hermeneutics is an interpretative concept of symbol, tradition, action, text, and other concrete material forms such as knowledge and technology. In hermeneutics, subject and object are known. Subject is the interpreter and object is the interpretative target. The role of the subject is to define what the object actually implies.<sup>1</sup>

According to Gadamer, in humanistic phenomenological sciences, understanding is considered as historical, dialectical, and linguistic event.<sup>2</sup> Phenomenology serves as basic assumption which is irreplaceable for hermeneutics. In any form and position in relation with people's experience, *Ilau* ritual – as an expression of Minangkabau people's feeling – is understood through analyzing its historical, dialectical, and linguistic background. To consider *Ilau* as a text in relation with an historical ritual, it is necessary to understand the past situation by a reconstruction to discover an authentic form so that it can be understood systematically and accurately. Linguistically, a ritual dialog is performed by interpreting the language used in it, either spoken (laments), spells, or symbols.

There are four principle concepts in humanistic research according to Gadamer's hermeneutics, which becomes the basic knowledge of hermeneutics. Gadamer argues the four concepts of *bildung*, *sensus communis*, *judgment* and *taste* must be taken into account in the process of understanding and interpreting.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, an understanding on historical, dialectical, and linguistic event of meaning interpretation of *Ilau* ritual should be viewed from the four humanistic concepts above.

## 3. Methodology

The method applied in this study is qualitative method by hermeneutic phenomenology approach. Since the purpose of the study is to interpret what is hidden in a certain phenomenon, which is sometimes difficult to discover, qualitative research method is necessitated to find implied meanings of *Ilau* performers' actions despite some transformations they have undergone. By this method, the researcher will discover the textual meaning of any action through interpretation towards the performers and the symbols the performers bring about in expressing sadness.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the foundation of the study. Hermeneutic phenomenology of tradition tends to primarily concern with human existence as something that must be interpreted. The perspective of Gadamer's hermeneutics places discourse meaning not on intention but on the receiver or addressee. Although discourse is produced by someone, it is not addressed to his or her own self. Discourse has become autonomous and free from its delivery. When text appears, its producer has gone free from it and its interpretation depends upon the addressee. Valdes states that "a researcher of Gadamerian hermeneutic perspective only interacts with the text".<sup>4</sup> The text is analyzed based on its meaning much deeper than its producer. The authority to interpret symbols depends on the interpreter's ability.

By the explanation above, therefore, the textual meaning of *Ilau* is not only understood from what

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*basawah baladang* (having rice field and farm land), *bahalaman bapamedanan* (having yard and field), and *bapandam bapusaro* (having grave yard) (Amir MS. *Adat Minangkabau Pola dan Tujuan Hidup Orang Minang*. (Mutiara Sumber Daya Jakarta:1997)

<sup>1</sup>. Josef Bleicher. *Hermeneutika Kontemporer*, translation by Iman Khoiri (Yogyakarta. Fajar pustaka:2007) p.60-69.

<sup>2</sup>. Richard E.Palmer.2005. *Op.cit.* p. 255.

<sup>3</sup>. Hans-Georg Gadamer. 2010. p.10-47.

<sup>4</sup>. Mario J Valdes, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection of Imagination* (Harvester Wheatsheaf. New York, London, Toronto,Sydney,Tokyo,Singapore:1991) p.398.

comes up while seeing the art symbols but also studied more profoundly from the meanings behind the symbols. Referring to the characteristics of hermeneutic phenomenology approach, the researcher will interact directly with the text and interpretatively analyze it. The people as well as the *Ilau* performers are also classified as texts to be interpreted. The interpretation of lamenting culture in *Ilau* is seen from the communication process through language of symbols. Such interpretation is needed to increase understanding towards discovering textual meanings. "Signs and symbols are the carrier of cultural meanings".<sup>1</sup> Interpreting cultural sociology is basically a presupposition of symbols, consideration of assumptions, and drawing of explanatory conclusions.

The world is where the interaction between meaning and human symbols takes place. Not all human actions are social actions. An action classified as social only when it takes into account other's behavior and oriented to another action. Richard argues that the key element of hermeneutic phenomenological framework of finding the connection between language and social action is intersubjectivity because through such a connection meaning construction (social construction) will constantly occur.<sup>2</sup> *Maratok* culture as a collective expression in death ritual came up with all art symbols and the people involved in it are a research object which is considered as text, whereas the researcher as an interpreter is the subject which will perform continuous communication with the object up to the point in which interpreted meaning can be obtained.

#### 4. Discussion

*Ilau* as a lamenting culture in Minangkabau, based on Gadamer's hermeneutics, contains multi-interpretation. Meaning associated with *sensus communis* in *Ilau* explicates the sentimental sense generated from sadness, anxiety, hope and pray of a mother, a wife, or a community for someone they love. *Ilau* as a sentimental word, referring to Clifford Geertz's theory of sentiment, consists of (1) a fear of risk, (2) despair for a loss, and (3) a joy for a victory.

A death of a son or husband may bring fear of risk to a mother or wife. The fear in *Ilau* of a son who is to be married is one that the mother feels about the son. This fear may be associated with the fact that a son will move out to his wife's house and leaves his mother after the wedding. It may also be associated with *Ilau beristri dua* (a husband practicing polygamy) which causes a wife to lose love and attention of her husband. Fear of risk is also represented by *Ilau menangkap harimau* (catching tiger ritual) of which people are afraid that the animal will steal their cattle or kill anyone in the *nagari*. They will always feel worried as long as the tiger remains free. All these fears are the feelings of restlessness related to psychology, knowledge, occupation, and possession.

Desperate feeling for losing a beloved one or cattle brings fear and sadness. A sentimental feeling is also related to joy coming out from a victory. Victory bears satisfaction, and so it is in a wedding ritual of a son. The parents of the bridegroom are satisfied and happy because the daughter's wedding runs smoothly; in addition, the wedding ends in the way it has been planned and expected.

The joy over a victory in *Ilau* of catching tiger is shared among the mourning members of a family when the tiger is locked up in bars (cage). The shaman is also happy and relieved for helping the *nagari*'s people.

Through describing almost all experiences of Minangkabau people by *Ilau*, several interpretative themes of sadness, fear, victory, wrath, male narcissism, status competition, passion, and submission are reflected. Sadness and fear appear in *Ilau* of death of either a child or village leader. Wrath emerges in *Ilau* of catching tiger. Male narcissism, status competition, and passion are found in *ratok bawak* and *ilau roduah*, *ilau naik*.

From the concept of *bildung*, the external materialization of *Ilau* culture which comprises art expressions concerning ritual symbols of lamenting performed by the community members in a *nagari* is a realization of brotherhood sense, mutual help, and sharing. It all reveals that *nagari*'s people belong to social unity based on the same culture, belief, and obedience to the same norms and values of life. In the context of *mamangan* Minangkabau culture is seen as "*putiah kapeh dapek दिलीक, putiah hati bakaadaan*" (one's sincerity is reflected by his behavior not by his physical appearance).

In addition to its function to express sadness, *Ilau* also serves as a medium of *silaturahmi* (friendship) and solidarity among *nagari* citizens. *Ilau* is believed to belong to *nagari*; sadness of a family is sadness of all citizens. All other people will show their sympathy and get themselves involved in the grief to feel what the family members feel.

*Ilau* also identifies mood in inner, which, in Minangkabau, is called "*sasakik sasanang, sahino samulia, saayun salangkah*" (together in joy and sorrow, in glory and indignity, and in peace and harmony). This is to build solidarity among the people, to feel what others feel, "*urang manangih awak sabak, Ilau urang Ilau pulo awak*" (we cry when someone cries). The expression suggests that solidarity is very essential in the daily life, and it is a symbol of "*raso sasakik jo sasanang*" (sharing joy and sorrow). This sense of solidarity in the *nagari*

<sup>1</sup>. Anang Santoso. *Pilihan Bahasa Dalam Wacana Politik*. A Dissertation at the Post Graduate Program of Universitas Negeri Malang. (Universitas Negeri Malang: Malang:2001) p.vii.

<sup>2</sup>. Hans-George Gadamer.2010. op.cit. p.48.

is dominated by women, especially those of middle-aged.

Furthermore, *Ilau* of death ritual is used as a medium of strengthening the bond of friendship and introducing *bako* family which is represented by giving betel leaf in a *kambuik* (a small velvet pouch). The *bako* family give the betel leaf to the husband's family as an introduction and symbol of sympathy for the death of a son of the husband's sister. Although Minangkabau people are matrilineal they do not ignore *bako*'s role. *Bako* has a significant role in a wedding or death ceremony. *Ilau* will not be performed without *bako*'s attendance in both ceremonies.

*Ilau* can represent patience; for example, for the death of beloved one. In *Ilau* of catching tiger, patience appears in the duration of ritual process which cannot be estimated. The ritual has to be performed every night until the tiger can be caught. It sometimes takes from two weeks up to one year. *Ilau* of catching tiger is the longest ritual of all *Ilau*'s history in Minangkabau. Patience in it is absolutely required with no limit. As long as the tiger has not been caught, the attempt should persistently be done.

*Ilau* also has educational values especially related to culture and social order of society. The first value can be reflected from *Ilau*'s concept of *merantau* (leaving village to make life in another place). *Merantau* is obligatory for men in Minangkabau. They must struggle in order to support the life of themselves and their nuclear family. Therefore, it implies how important the role of men in Minangkabau culture. Furthermore, the educational value can also be learned from their costumes used, function and position of *penghulu*, and the meaning of *carano*. The value in marriage is seen from the *Ilau* of son's wedding and the *Ilau* of polygamy. When a son is married, advices are given in order that the son is ready for the marriage. Advices are also given to a husband who is planning to marry another woman, which is realized in *Ilau* dance of husband with two wives.

The religious values are coded in songs of submitting life to Allah. Any calamity of losing son or husband is due to Allah's decision. Men do not have a choice but leave everything and pray to Allah so that He will provide them with finest place. In addition, mother's lament expresses hope and pray of a mother for her son who will leave the *nagari* to make a better life in another place and can bring pride of the family.

*Ilau* may also be a competition of emotions, which can be found in the laments of *penghulu*'s wives. The laments are performed back and forth like a dialog as a competition to show how they feel about their husband. A competition also occurs between the wives of a husband, in which both are competing to win the love and affection of the husband. Such competition is represented by movements in a dance.

*Ilau* is related to the kinship system of Minangkabau people. *Ilau* precisely reveals the positions of women and men in matrilineal system. *Ilau* distinguishes its performers according to their cultural norms. Although in general it relates to women's feeling – a mother or a wife, in this case – the performers are not necessarily women; it depends on what kind of *Ilau* they will perform.

In matrilineal system, women's dignity is highly respected, and hence it cannot be displayed in any occasion. To express women's sadness in *Ilau* of death, the ritual is performed by middle-aged women. For all concerning with death ritual, women are permitted to lament; it is not prohibited for them to be with the crowd under such situation, especially because all the mourners share the same feeling. However, for *Ilau* usually watched by a crowd like *Ilau* of a son's wedding, women are not permitted. This *Ilau* is performed in front of the bride and bridegroom and all guests. Although it conveys sadness it is performed in a cheerful situation. *Ilau* of a husband practicing polygamy is performed by men in front of *penghulu* and *niniak mamak*. *Ilau* of catching tiger is done by men and supported by both men and women. *Ilau* performers are determined by the norms, especially concerning with women's participation. Everything associated with women is well-regulated in Minangkabau culture.

*Ilau* is also interpreted as a medium of sharing feelings. It is natural that when a woman feels sad it will be relieving for her to share it with others. Women are thought of having no control over their emotions compared to men. When they are sad they will cry immediately, and even it can take them hours to be in deep sorrow if they feel terribly depressed. Differently, men are prohibited to shed tears even in the saddest occasion. It is enough for them to express the feeling by their eyes.

Even though *Ilau* is an expression of women's sadness, it is in fact related to men. Men's position is very important in the culture. When they are mature enough they will act as *mamak* or *penghulu*. *Mamak* and *penghulu* are highly responsible for their nuclear family. For this important position, there are several *Ilau* commonly used to cry over men.





From *bildung* concept, *Ilau* refers to external realizations such as art, expression, and symbol. Textual meanings conveyed in it include art expressions realized in symbols as metaphors. The meanings can be found in signs and symbols where they have some capacity to lead us to interpret meanings contained in it. Based on the concept, the meanings are generated from the signs and symbols. Besides carrying literal meanings, there are some contradictions in the meanings of the signs and symbols like in the stage of throwing away money in *Ilau* of death of *penghulu* or *ratok awak*. This ritual implies giving charity to people in the *nagari*.

Throwing away money, which is then vied and collected by children and observed by all the mourners, is not a good way giving charity. This is to demonstrate arrogance and different social status. People who give away money are usually the haves whereas those who vie to collect it are the have nots. This procession is usually done in *Ilau* of death of a *penghulu* who is usually regarded as a rich man. Therefore, there is an inconsistency between the symbol and its meaning, or it can be inferred that a contradiction between the symbol and its meaning occurs. A similar contradiction also appears in *Ilau turun*. A marriage should be a symbol of happiness, yet there is a meaning of sadness and anxiety of the mother in it.

As an idea of people in a *nagari* as a form of people's common sense, *Ilau* has long been a culture considered right and good. When a calamity befalls upon a family such as death of a son or *penghulu*, a son's marriage, and losing family member or cattle, people will immediately be engaged in it. Their involvement is due to the belief of what is right and good, and what should be done. Who should be involved in the *Ilau* is determined by the rules and regulations of Minangkabau culture.

The costumes used in *Ilau* are commonly of dark colors because *Ilau* itself is related to sadness or grief. Women wear *baju kurung* (traditional dress of Malay women), sarong, and head cover (veil), which is in accordance with the religion they believe. The costumes are appropriate for Minangkabau women according to Islamic value.

Aesthetically, *Ilau* ritual, as a form of experience by people in the *nagari* at the time, presents values which grow from the people's normative idea concerning morality and solidarity. Melodic laments and body movements with no manipulation can lift up emotions to the most sacred and highest level. The beauty of *Ilau* ritual is a manifestation of what people in the *nagari* felt at the time, referring to their normative idea.

As a representation of a *nagari*'s people, *Ilau* universally describes one's feeling collectively realized. It has different forms and functions in each *nagari*. It is a convention among the members of a *nagari* based on such thought as its validity, seen from any relevant situation in the community where it appears.

## 5. Conclusion

*Ilau* is a terminology used to express sadness due to death or loss, restlessness, bemoaning, and hope from a calamity, which is realized in either laments of melodic words, spells, or body movements. *Ilau* is performed for several events such as death of son away from home, son's marriage, death of husband or village leader, loss of cattle, and loss of love from a husband who marries another woman. Such concept becomes a convention among people about *Ilau* culture. The ritual is not lament merely but it describes emotional relationship between the performers and what is being lamented.

Even though *Ilau* is interpreted as women's sadness, it is closely related to men, for example, in death of son or *penghulu*, son's marriage, and husband to have a second wife. Men are highly important in Minangkabau as they are the protectors of their nuclear family and their community fellows. Thus, when a man passes away or leaves home *Ilau* ritual is performed. *Ilau* may also be understood as a medium of friendship, solidarity, education, religious activity, hope, fear, wrath, male narcissism, passion, patience, prestige, and emotional competition; all of which are associated with women's sentimental feeling, be it a mother, a wife, or a

member of *nagari*. The meaning of *Ilau* is generated from signs and symbols in it. Besides literal meaning, some contradictions of the signs and symbols also exist.

*Ilau* collectively belongs to people of a *nagari*, describing solidarity, which is in Minangkabau said as “*sasakik, sasanang, sahibo, samulia, saayun, salangkah*”(sharing sadness, happiness, dishonor, dignity, harmony). It is to represent sense of togetherness among the people, which is expressed in such wise words as “*urang managih awak sabak, ilau urang, ilau pulo awak*” (when someone cries, so do we, when someone performs *Ilau*, and so do we). *Ilau* is a symbol of “*raso sasakik, sasanang*” (sharing the same feeling both in joy and sorrow).

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